

Testimony of Megan E. Yorio
IICAPS Clinician, The Village for Families and Children

Hello, my name is Megan Yorio and I am here to testify in support of funding for Legal Services Organizations.

As a Therapist working in the IICAPS Program at The Village for Families and Children, I can personally attest to the value of the services that Legal Aid organizations provide. Greater Hartford Legal Aid has been monumental in assisting our clients in getting adequate support and much needed representation within the school systems.

The IICAPS Program (Intensive In-home Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Services) works specifically with children with severe psychiatric and behavioral problems. These problems are so severe that these kids are at high risk of being hospitalized or removed from the home. As such, for most of the children in the IICAPS program, school has proven to be one of the biggest obstacles and greatest stressors. For some of them, years of not getting adequate support has caused school to be the single biggest trigger for behavioral problems or psychiatric symptoms. Because of this, many of the IICAPS kids have been wrongfully labeled as oppositional, disruptive, out of control, or defiant, without an adequate assessment of how their disability manifests into maladaptive behaviors within the school. The outcome of this is that children end up having problems in school, skipping class regularly, getting suspended for days at a time, or expelled.

For these youths, Greater Hartford Legal Aid attorneys have worked to get services that are necessary to manage these behaviors in school. Through attendance at Planning and Placement Team meetings, Legal Aid attorneys inform parents about educational rights and ensure the school is adhering to the law. With their advocacy, Legal Aid attorneys have been able to successfully secure smaller class sizes, structured classrooms, individual paraprofessionals for one-on-one support, additional tutoring, and therapeutic placements outside of the district. Attorneys at Legal Aid have also assisted in getting much needed testing to determine if specialized support is needed, such as speech or occupational therapy.

What is the impact of these services? The children demonstrate confidence in being able to navigate through school successfully towards a high school graduation and beyond. From a therapeutic perspective, we see stability in terms of their symptoms because they are working in a system that can support their needs. The services provided have also helped parents to feel empowered with the knowledge and awareness of what their children are entitled to receive and how to go about obtaining it. We have even seen parents who are able to better provide for their families on a whole because they no longer have to stand by the phone waiting for a call from the school asking them to pick up their children. Without funding to Legal Aid, these children will continue to be overlooked in school and lost in life. More broadly, the educational advocacy work encourages the school system to evaluate children on an individual basis in order to meet their unique needs.

For these reasons, I would like to encourage you to support funding for Legal Services organizations. Thank you.